

Improving the Public's Understanding of the Role of Public Health

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Clean water. Safe food. Immunizations. Response to disease outbreaks. Explanations of why people are experiencing illness and what can be done to prevent it. People value these functions, as local and national surveys plainly show. But they do not know that public health is responsible for them.

A January 1997 Harris Poll showed that more than 80% of those surveyed ranked disease prevention, immunization, and protection from unsafe water and air to be “very important.” But of participants in a 1999 national poll who were asked what they thought “public health” meant, only 27% identified “programs that maintain healthy living conditions,” while 23% mentioned health services for poor people.

Focus groups conducted by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) revealed that members of the public generally expressed a high level of trust in public health work, even when they distrusted government in general.

The public generally understands what a fire department, police department, or school district does. And they understand that these services have important effects on their quality of life.

The public recognizes public health services as equally important, but it does not associate these services with their local or state public health agencies.

All residents of a community benefit from public health services, regardless of whether they ever walk through the door of a public health agency. But when the public doesn't understand this, people are less likely to work with public health agencies or programs to solve local health problems. This lack of awareness thus impedes the public health system's ability to protect and improve health.

When public and private organizations do not understand the depth of services provided by public health agencies, valuable partnership opportunities are missed. And policy makers miss opportunities for problem solving and health improvement when they do not turn to public health agencies for advice and technical consultation.

DOH, the State Board of Health, and WSALPHO are working together to increase the public's understanding of public health services. With that understanding, community leaders will set clear goals for better health and build alliances

Some of the Many Ways that Public Health Is Influencing the Health of our Communities

People need to know that they have the public health system to thank when they—

- Are confident that the tap water in their homes is safe to drink.
- Eat in a restaurant without fear of contracting a foodborne illness.
- Know that the child waiting in line near them at the supermarket is immunized against measles and polio.
- Relax in a theater or hotel lobby without breathing tobacco smoke.
- Drive with the knowledge that other drivers are wearing seatbelts, and bicyclists are wearing helmets.
- Send their children to school with other children who are growing up without abuse and neglect because of programs that strengthen families.

to achieve them. In addition to increased partnerships, individual community members will have a better understanding of the health of their communities and the role they can play as individuals and families in identifying and solving collective health problems.

38 Much can be accomplished when people and organizations band together to solve health problems. Such efforts have persuaded the public to wear seatbelts, stop drinking and driving, and ensure smoke-free environments at home and in public.

The PHIP partnership will develop strategies to inform and involve the public, resulting in a coordinated approach with all of the state's public health agencies to foster greater understanding of public health, how it works, and why it is a critical part of every community's basic services.

This effort will help our health departments develop a clear voice in their communities, and it will help all our potential partners make the connection between what they value in terms of health and how the public health system protects them.

Next Steps

For Improving the Public's Understanding of the Role of Public Health

1. Increase public understanding of the mission of public health: to protect and improve the health of all people in Washington State.
2. Improve public understanding of the breadth and depth of public health services, and increase public participation in addressing and solving health problems.
3. Obtain a better understanding of what the public needs to know in order to make good decisions about its health and the health of its community.